

Shaking the Foundations of Postsecondary Art(ist) Education in Visual Culture

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Where do our beliefs and attitudes about art foundations come from? Are the foundations we inherited appropriate for contemporary art(ist) education in the U.S.? Are there models available to help reconceptualize introductory art courses? Will these give students the tools and skills necessary to be thoughtful and critical artists and citizens in contemporary visual culture?

Walk into a studio classroom in a first-year undergraduate art program in the U.S. and you will likely find curriculum organized around art forms and materials, and encounter students making art that highlights the presentation and application of the visual elements: line, shape, color, texture, mass, volume, pattern, etc. These undergraduate studio classes may be titled and organized around 2-D design, color theory, and beginning drawing. While additional studio courses may be available or required at different institutions, they are usually still organized around dimensions such as 3-D and 4-D design, or media such as painting or ceramics. Substantiating this claim, Dockery and Quinn's (2006) research of 55 sites of higher education found that most of the "accredited institutions researched—with some exceptions—are concerned with training/engaging the foundations student primarily in and through physical/manual skills" (p. 43) (in addition, see Betz, 2003, for survey results of over 250 foundation instructors).

Many art educators share similar experiences and the attendant lessons instilled in such undergraduate art *foundations* programs. Unfortunately, the curricula in these courses often emphasize a pre-occupation with form and media removed from content, context, and theory. The focus on so-called fundamentals of art tends to separate student knowledge and experiences of art from understandings of cultural production and the material conditions of life (Freedman, 2003). K-12 art educators' introduction to art through formalist foundation courses may help explain why elements and principles of art and design, and technical practices dominate K-12 art curricula (Chapman, 1982; Efland, Freedman, & Stuhr, 1996). As Gude (2004) pointed out, "teaching understanding of the elements and principles of design is the major curriculum goal for art teachers at the beginning of the 21st century. . . The elements and principles are presented as the essence of artmaking" (p. 6). Because the focus on form and media in art are introduced as *basic*, it is easy to forget that foundations courses, and the ideas about art that such courses embed in the hearts and minds of many art educators, reflect socially and historically grounded understandings of art and the education of artists (Shipp, 2004).

Where do our beliefs and attitudes about art foundations come from? Are the foundations we inherited appropriate for contemporary art(ist) education in the U.S.? Are there models available to help reconceptualize introductory art courses? Will these give students the tools and skills necessary to be thoughtful and critical artists and citizens in contemporary visual culture? And, what are the relationships between, and possible outcomes of, changes in undergraduate and K-12 art education?

In this article, we first provide historical context for foundations in artist education at the postsecondary level. We then provide an overview of a first-year art program that challenges the status quo of foundations. Finally, we address the implications of such differing approaches to K-12 art education, making connections and posing questions for future research.

The Founding of Foundations

Inspiration for foundations courses in art schools, colleges, and universities in the U.S., and the skills and concepts they cover are commonly attributed to the preliminary course offered at the German Bauhaus School of Art and Design (1919-1933).¹ According to Whitford (1994), "Every student now pursuing a 'foundation course' at an art school has the Bauhaus to thank for it" (p. 10). Teaching-artist Johannes Itten devised the original curriculum for that course in an effort to reconnect adult art students with the artistic freedoms they manifest in childhood. One of his inspirations for the course was Frederick Froebel's philosophy of constructive play, illustrated by his "Gifts," which are primarily visual and tactile exercises similar to those executed in modern 2-D and 3-D design courses (Brosterman & Togashi, 1997). Bauhaus founder Walter Gropius shared Itten's belief that intuitive responses to materials and ideas were conditioned out of people by restrictive social and educational structures and expectations. Indeed, Gropius' proposal for establishing the school was linked to the development of a newly democratic Germany.

Singerman (1999) suggested that degree granting colleges and universities require "a reproducible and certifiable [and measurable] knowledge—a language at once theoretical and esoteric—on which to found and consolidate the exclusivity of a discipline or profession and to guarantee its members' status as experts" (p. 156). Adaptations of the Bauhaus's seemingly manageable "visual science" helped establish this language in the U.S. (Whitford & Cave, 2004). The standardization of many foundations courses today, which tend to treat lessons as means to an end, and knowledge as taxonomic, ignores this history (Dockery & Quinn, 2006; Fouquet, 2004).

László Moholy-Nagy developed the first curriculum for the New Bauhaus in Chicago (1937-46) including a preliminary course he called *foundations*. This was the first documented use of the term, perhaps a way of describing course content to The Association of Arts and Industry, who sponsored the New Bauhaus and relied upon standard tools of mass production and circulation (Findeli, 1990). Moholy-Nagy likely used the term "foundations" as a rhetorical device to suggest that at a basic level, art, like science and industry, must comply with standards.

Because they are introduced as *basic*, it is easy to overlook the historical and political contexts from which the foundations tradition emerged. Bauhaus introductory principles not only reflected but also contributed to the development of Modernist artistic practices (Goldstein, 1996). As Jackson (1997) suggested, "teaching of composition has evolved into ideology—a historically and culturally determined idea that has become virtually unchallenged as universal truth" (p. 36). These practices are all too familiar to many art educators, manifest through the study of abstract form, color relationships, and design problems removed from socio-political content and context, the teaching of the so-called elements and principles as fossilized fundamentals, and uncritical and solipsistic exercises producing endless stacks of still lifes, life drawings, and landscape paintings (Freedman, 2003; Tavin, 2007; Wilson, 2000). The skills, concepts, and information that qualified as basic at the Bauhaus have a strong grip on art programs at all levels in the U.S. Their use often reflects detached conceptions of the character of art and the roles of artists in schools and in society, ironic given the socially-conscious orientation of Gropius's vision for the original Bauhaus.

Current Considerations for Foundations

Beginning in the 1970s and increasing over the past decade, the traditional *Foundations* curriculum has received critical attention (Betz, 2003; Dockery & Quinn, 2006; Mahoney, 1970). Debates over what constitutes fundamental art education have generally focused around three primary concerns. First, some argue that the Modern, formalist agenda ignores the complex contexts in which art and visual culture is produced and given meaning. Critics call for transdisciplinary studies that engage knowledge and skills that go beyond formal objectives (Becker, 1996; Chen, 2002; Jackson, 1997; Mayer, 1994; Wittenbraker, 2002). Second, the development and incorporation of new technologies that challenge traditional definitions and functions of art, artists, and artistic institutions have captured the attention of teaching-artists and the institutions that employ them (Larmann, 1996; Solomon, 2000; Stensaas, 1999). Third, as the population of students entering postsecondary learning environments continues to increase in number and diversity, teaching-artists are increasingly

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concerned with pedagogical issues previously reserved for primary and secondary educators (Barrett, 2006; Clifton, 2005; Moss, 2000). In this section, we discuss some of these issues in greater detail.

Ten years ago, Jackson (1997) declared that "the foundations idea, in its present most common form, is poorly suited to the challenges of training critical contemporary artists" (p. 34). Jackson proposed that art programs should develop and nurture "critical creative intelligence" (p. 36) in students, in part by addressing concepts of hybridity, appropriation, intertextuality, popular culture, cultural criticism, and critical theory, through both art production and seminar discussions. Notably, these concepts overlap with Gude's (2004) ideas for the Postmodern Principles for K-12 art education, and resonate with ideas for high school art education put forth by Taylor, Carpenter, Ballengee-Morris, and Sessions (2006).

Believing that much of what is taught under the rubric of foundations is outdated and blind to contemporary practices, Jackson (1997) continued, "I, for one, can no longer plunk a student down in front of a still life or a landscape with an uncritical pedagogical recitation of details of traditional compositional and formalist practice without feeling like a phony" (p. 37). In agreement, Moss (2000) proposed that foundation instructors:

should ask [themselves] about the assumptions that should be exposed, in addition to the content that must be covered ... critique and undermine the notion of aesthetic distance; argue for a new way of thinking about art that reveals the complexities of art's relationship to social change; make primary what is most contentious and contradictory about teaching art. (p. 10)

Given these critiques and considerations about foundations, many programs and institutions have modified their traditional foundations curricula (made up of 2-D, 3-D, Color Theory, Beginning Drawing, etc.) with additional and alternative courses. Grand Valley

State University, for example, added a course to their foundations program called "Creative Problem Solving" (Wittenbraker, 2002). This course deals with new media, big ideas, and critical concepts. The foundations program at the University of Florida, Gainesville developed and implements "The Workshop for Art Research" (W.A.R.P.). According to two of the program's developers, Catterall and Nugent (1999), this course "is intended to address the discrepancy between practice and perception of contemporary art ... students assess their preconceptions about art and consider their role as artists within a cultural context" (p. 5).

While most of the changes in art foundations maintain some traditionally defined foundations courses with one or two added conceptual classes, there are rare examples of programs that organize courses around themes, and modes of making² and thinking in and through art rather than media or other formal qualities (i.e., no longer requiring courses titled 2-D, 3-D, 4-D, drawing, etc.). The First Year Program at the School of the Art Institute of Chicago (SAIC) is one example of an innovative curriculum that reconceptualizes foundations.

Reconceptualizing Foundations

For over a decade, SAIC worked to reconceptualize the structure and content of its First Year Program (FYP)—what other institutions call *foundations*—in response to several overarching principles. These include SAIC's mission to promote transdisciplinary thinking and production, the development of each student's individual voice, and a dedication to enacting and extending diverse definitions of artist, designer, cultural producer, facilitator, collaborator, provocateur, and teacher. Similar to the current shift toward visual culture in K-12 art education, the larger aim and ongoing challenge for SAIC has been to develop a curriculum that considers students' varied experience through contemporary culture (Duncum, 2006; Tavin, 2003).

At its inception in the mid 1980s, FYP was conceived as a group of courses that intro-

duced beginning students to a breadth of art forms, methods, tools, and ideas. Initially this took the form of four courses that provided instruction on two-dimensional (2-D Studio I & II), three-dimensional (3-D Studio), and four-dimensional design (4-D Studio). The First Year Program was designed to help students make informed choices about their future individualized course of study. Despite the diverse and open-ended opportunities available to students, in many ways the curriculum of FYP in its early stages mirrored traditional foundations curriculum in the U.S.

By the mid 1990s, however, it became clear that the structure and content of these *dimensionally specific* courses restricted students from realizing the transferable character of techniques, vocabulary and concepts. In other words, students had no curricular bridges that concretely demonstrated the analogous links between the "Ds." In response, FYP replaced 2-D Studio II with a research-oriented course, "Research Studio." This course provided students the opportunity to synthesize knowledge learned in the "Ds" while exploring the themes, practices, and contexts of cultural inquiry undertaken by contemporary artists. At the time, Carol Becker (1996), Dean of Faculty at SAIC, hoped these curricular changes would:

allow for intense student writing about their work as well as readings related to the issues surrounding the place of artists in society. . . where students would learn how artists actually work, how creative the circuitous research process of artists is, and how essential these processes are to making serious work. (p. 12)

At this stage of its transformation FYP, while moving toward a broader reconceptualization, could still be seen only as a modified foundations program with integrated research modules.

The most recent revisions to FYP curriculum and structure, which are considered by some to be more radical (Fendrich, 2005), are due in part to the effectiveness of "Research Studio" in helping students apply a variety of new approaches to developing work, and providing students an opportunity to build a community around the critical examination of contemporary culture. Instead of traditional foundations titles and content, the course offerings at SAIC are "Core Studio Practice" and "Research Studio I & II."

The stories from classroom teachers and their case for change in K-12 art education underpin the need for a deeper understanding of, and collaboration with, changes at the post-secondary level.

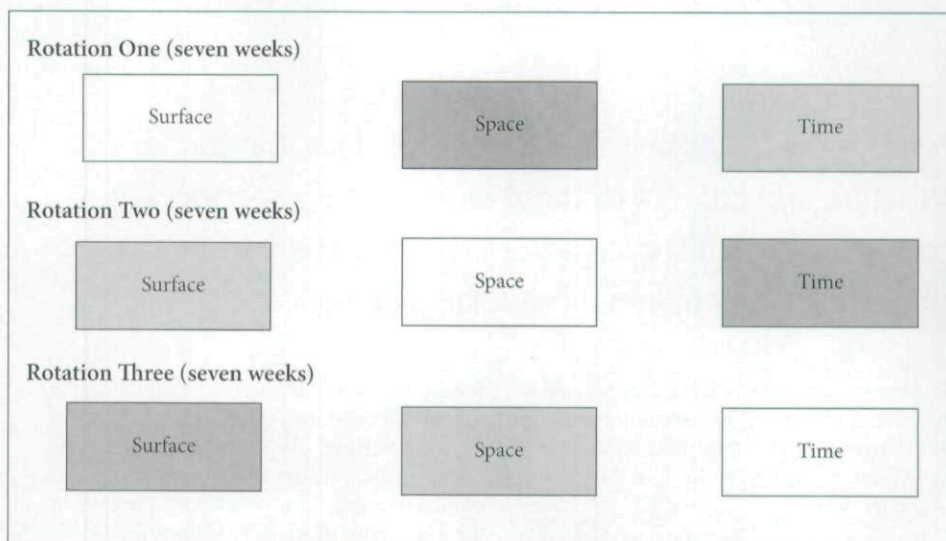


Figure 1. FYP Core Studio Practice Rotation Schematic.

FYP Curriculum

Core Studio Practice (referred to by faculty and students as Core) presents a rigorous investigation of conceptual, technical, and critical skills common to diverse areas of cultural production. The curriculum is designed to emphasize the simultaneous development of technical practice and conceptual thinking. The course is team-taught by three instructors who guide 45 students through artmaking activities, presentations, and critiques, over two semesters. In addition to projects involving the whole Core, smaller groups of 15 students work with individual faculty in their respective areas of research and production during three 7-week rotations.

The rotations are organized around modes of making—*Surface*, *Space*, and *Time* (see Figure 1). Meta-themes extend these areas of practice beyond formalist concerns and unify the core, even as small groups focus on different modes of making. In the past, these meta-themes, or what Walker (2001) might call “big ideas” for K-12 art education, have included: *Tracings*, *Metamorphosis*, *Futures*, *Urban Legends*, *Simulation*, *Mapping*, *The Ideology of Your Future Self*, *Encounter/Displacement*, *Social Memory*, *Prothesis*, and *Chance*.

For example, while in the *Space* rotation exploring the meta-theme “truth,” one student created a large representation of a hand in wood. Although the form was a fairly straightforward representation dealing with human physicality as a truth, conceptually

Figure 2. Student project on meta-theme, “jailbreak.”

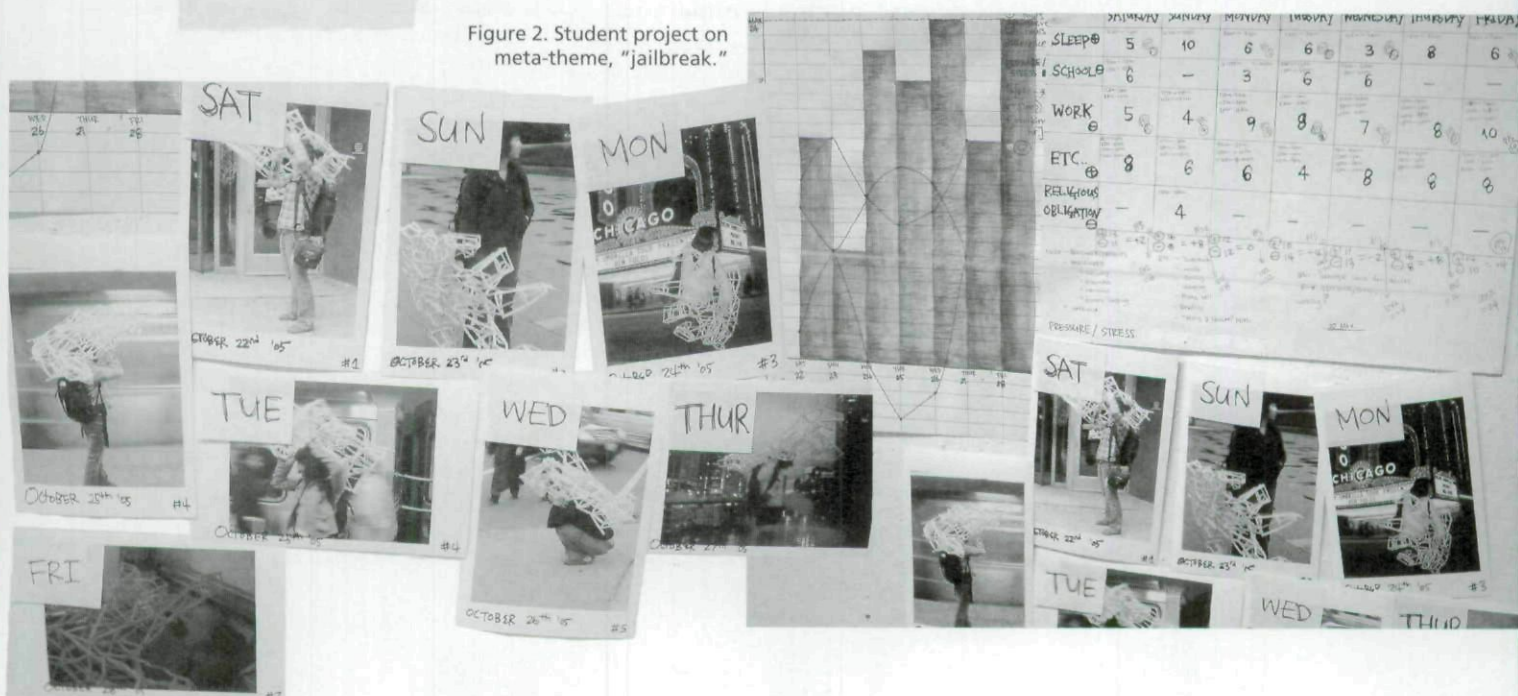




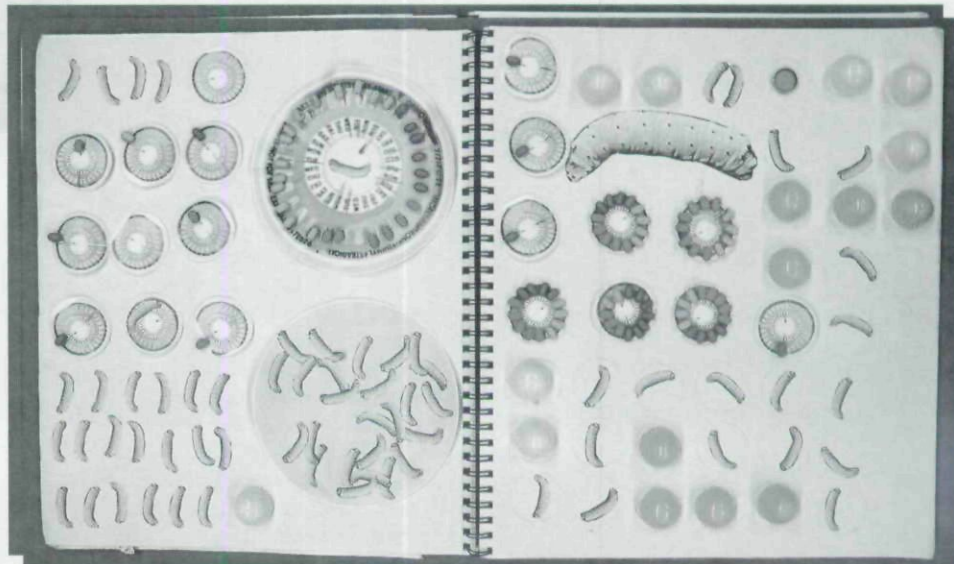
Figure 3. Research Studio II project, Looking at Animals. From top: Platypus wallpaper, Kiki candy as fundraising tool, leech-delivered birth control system, and tropical mantis fashions.



she was referencing the weight of cultural and familial expectation, and her sense of obligation perhaps to a historical model or a previously assumed truth. Her subsequent rotation *Time* worked with the meta-theme "jailbreak." The student utilized her hand sculpture for daily documentation and as an imposition on her, something to endure for a time. It felt like a weight—a literal physical weight and a metaphor of the weight of culture, history, family, and the pressures of art school. The hand, the graphing and charting of her days' activities, and the documentation polaroids of her performing those activities became a playful yet transformative project for this student. (See Figure 2).

Through critiques at the end of each rotation, students see how artists can approach common concerns through a range of projects and related processes. This process supports SAIC's interest in transdisciplinary investigation. The fourth rotation, *Conclusion*, occurs at the end of the second semester. This is an opportunity to extend approaches to artmaking in two parts: A Collective Project and an individual Culminating Project.


Concurrent to Core Studio Practice, students take "Research Studios I and II." In "Research Studio I," students explore various archival resources at SAIC and throughout the city. Students begin to develop a personal research direction by creating and cataloging collections of images, objects, and information in relation to their own artwork. "Research Studio II" has a thematic focus that informs a student's research and resolution of projects. Students choose a "Research Studio II" section based on interests they develop over the course of the first semester and in consultation with their first semester Research Studio instructor and



Academic Advisor. In the past, Research Studio II topics have included: "Text in Art," "Out of Actions," "Me/You: About Identity," "Looking at Animals," and "Pop Culture on the Skids."

An example from "Looking at Animals" asked students to investigate clothing and accessories on view at the Fashion Resource Center made with real and artificial fur, hides,

and feathers, explore the politics of animal protection laws, and then design a product for domestic use based on a single species, incorporating ideas about the animal's structure and the utility of that structure, as well as mythical and social ideas about the animal. (See Figure 3.)



With the benefit of critical self-reflection coupled with a deep understanding of the changes in foundations programs, art educators at all levels may be better equipped to engage their students in meaningful, postmodern art practices—balancing the need to learn skills with critical issues in contemporary cultural production. In this sense, the shaking of foundations may help keep us grounded.

In sum, the reconceptualized FYP is a flexible program that supports shared learning, criticality, and individual experience that can evolve based on educational needs. Unlike other more traditional foundations programs, students make art and talk about art through a negotiation of multiple viewpoints, research of historical, cultural, political, and social contexts, and investigation of a theme informed by contemporary visual culture.

Implications for K-12 Art Education

Postmodern art education values issues of visual culture and the instrumental roles art and artists play as critical educators in society. Changes in foundations curricula at the postsecondary level, such as those at SAIC, may be a promising move toward postmodernism. Art educators at the K-12 level can look at these changes, connect them to current calls for the reconceptualization of content and practice in the field,³ and provide insight for classroom practice. Recent discussions between members of the National Art Education Association (NAEA), the College Art Association (CAA), and Foundations in Art, Theory, and Education (FATE) (see Burton, 2007), as well as recent articles by Barrett (2006) and Kent (2006) in FATE's journal, are promising signs.

Art educators may notice the similarities between Barrett's (2006) postmodern themes for foundations (i.e., Rejecting Originality, Working Collaboratively, Jouissance, Simulating, Hybridizing, Mixing Codes, Confronting the Gaze, and Facing the Abject) and Gude's (2007) *Principles of Possibility* for K-12 art education. In addition, there are parallels between critiques of traditional postsecondary foundations and problems with current media and technique-based art instruction at the high school level. For example, Taylor, Carpenter, Ballengee-Morris, and Sessions (2006) stated, "rather than basing curriculum on learning a medium or technique, we recommend that [high school] art teachers base their units of instruction on a problem, issue, or question gleaned from works of art and visual culture" (p. 39). Similarly, Stewart and Walker (2005) called for rethinking high school art curriculum from traditional modes of media and methods to big ideas, enduring ideas, and key concepts that help guide art instruction and visual culture pedagogy.

At the pre-K-8 level, art educators call for change as well. The recent text, *Visual Culture in the Art Class: Case Studies* (Duncum, 2006) offers examples of preschool, elementary, and middle school curricula that move beyond the fossilized elements and principles, and archaic concepts of art, toward a thematic, issues-based study of visual culture. The stories from classroom teachers and their case for change in K-12 art education underpin the need for a deeper understanding of, and collaboration with, changes at the postsecondary level.

If nothing else, the challenges and changes to postsecondary foundations programs should cause us to problematize our own values and beliefs about what constitutes "foundational art knowledge" and its affect on our own practice. Perhaps we should ask ourselves how and when we learned about art, artmaking, and basic concepts of art education. We might consider how our ideals and practices are affected (or not) by changes in the contemporary art world and visual culture. With the benefit of critical self-reflection coupled with a deep understanding of the changes in foundations programs, art educators at all levels may be better equipped to engage their students in meaningful, postmodern art practices—balancing the need to learn skills with critical issues in contemporary cultural production. In this sense, the shaking of foundations may help keep us grounded.

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ENDNOTES

¹ Less frequently evoked in discussions of the founding of *foundations* are the influences of The Royal Academy of Painting in France (est. 1648) (Goldstein, 1996; Pevsner, 1973). The first public art schools in the U.S. including The Pennsylvania Academy of Art (est. 1805) and the National Academy of Design (est. 1825) were modeled after the French Academy. Beginning drawing courses typically required in foundation programs are a lasting legacy of the French Academy.

² The term "modes of making" was suggested by Alison Crocetta, Foundations Coordinator at The Ohio State University.

³ See Carpenter, S. & Tavin, K. (in press) for a discussion of the "reconceptualization" of art education.

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